

# DRIVER'S ED IN SESSION IN SAUDI ARABIA

BY WILLIAM BASS

September 27, 2017 removed a substantial roadblock for women in Saudi Arabia. Fueled by a newfound political will, the Saudi king signed a decree allowing women to apply for driver's licenses.<sup>1</sup> This strategic move is central to the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030, an initiative aiming to bolster Saudi Arabia's presence in the region and world as a political, cultural, and economic power.<sup>2</sup> As the last country in the world to unbar women from driving, this reform marks a step toward the realization of Saudi Arabia's gender equality agenda.<sup>3</sup>

Initially, this development will catalyze the expansion of the domestic automotive market, while simultaneously straining Saudi Arabia's highways and necessitating significant infrastructure investment. Such a drastic social policy shift will generate economic growth and ultimately outweigh the initial sunk costs in infrastructure improvements brought on by an influx of new drivers. However, expectations of the legitimate sociopolitical benefits and rights afforded to women in Saudi Arabia through this reform should be tempered.

## ECONOMIC IMPACT LONG-TERM GROWTH WILL OUTWEIGH AN INITIAL INFRASTRUCTURE DEFICIT

Over time, the rapid expansion of Saudi Arabia's automotive market will exhaust the country's roads and transportation infrastructure. A PwC report estimates that this reform will engender 3 million new female drivers compared to only half a million new male drivers by 2020.<sup>4</sup> The same report predicts that car sales and car leasing will maintain an annual growth rate of 9 percent and 4 percent until 2025, respectively.<sup>5</sup> A sharp uptick in car sales will place roads under duress as the influx of new drivers introduce their freshly purchased automobiles to highways. The gradual dilapidation of paved highways will demand the attention of the Transport Ministry to reinforce existing infrastructure and maintain the functionality of roads. Certain regions, including the Mecca province, Eastern province, Medina, and Riyadh, will experience a more significant expansion in the number of new drivers on the roads.<sup>6</sup> These cities will simultaneously witness an increase in the degree of traffic and traffic-related wait times, which could galvanize demand for the construction of new highways.

The proliferation of new automobiles will also demand additional gas stations and parking areas throughout the country. While primary responsibilities for road construction and maintenance could fall upon the shoulders of regional governments, such a massive increase in infrastructure demand may catalyze regional leaders to appeal to the federal government for financial and technical support.

However, the opportunity for economic expansion will outweigh the initial demand for infrastructure investment. Economic growth and job creation are central objectives of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030.<sup>7</sup> The legalization of driving rights for women will play a vital role in fulfilling these ambitions. The enhanced mobility that Saudi women now possess will lead to greater participation in the job market over time. This policy change has already profoundly impacted the Saudi economy and will continue to do so as the economy adapts. An uptick in the number of job-seeking women will boost the size of the workforce, increase overall incomes and output, diminish the demand for foreign labor, and enhance consumer purchasing power.<sup>8</sup> The expansion of consumer purchasing power will fuel an increase in spending throughout multiple sectors. Granting women the ability to drive will also bolster Saudi Arabia's overall economic productivity by allowing men to remain at their jobs throughout the day instead of periodically taking time off work to drive female relatives to jobs and appointments.<sup>9</sup>

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## ... GIVING WOMEN THE RIGHT TO DRIVE COULD INJECT A MUCH-NEEDED ENERGY INTO POLITICAL DISCOURSE WITHIN SAUDI ARABIA.

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Saudi Arabia will also experience the expansion of industries complementary to the automobile sales sector. Between 2017 and 2020, the motor insurance industry is expected to grow by 9 percent annually to reach \$8 billion, according to a press release from PwC.<sup>10</sup> The proliferation of additional garages and automobile maintenance shops will reflect the increase in the number of automobile owners throughout

the country. The state will establish schools specifically for women to provide appropriate driver education classes. By lifting the driving ban on women, a significant reduction in the number of foreign chauffeurs is expected to reduce foreign transfers by \$1.3 billion annually.<sup>11</sup> Bloomberg explains that altogether the reform "could add as much as \$90 billion to economic output by 2030, with the benefits extending beyond the date."<sup>12</sup>

### **SOCIO-POLITICAL IMPACT** *ONLY ONE PIECE OF AN ELABORATE PUZZLE*

A petrostate such as Saudi Arabia confines women to the agricultural labor force due to its dependence on the revenues from the male-dominated industry of oil production. This entrapment of women into the domestic sphere has extensive political consequences.<sup>13</sup> Fewer women working outside the home constrains the exchange of information and propensity for collective action. In turn, women living in a petrostate are less likely to mobilize and lobby for expanded rights, which leads to less representation in government. While Saudi Arabia will remain dependent on its male-dominated oil industry for the foreseeable future, the legalization of women's right to drive could reduce the impact of this petrostate pathology. The enhanced mobility engendered by this reform could increase connectivity and the exchange, debate, and mobilization around political issues. Overall, giving women the right to drive could inject a much-needed energy into political discourse within Saudi Arabia.

Yet, the sociopolitical benefits are unlikely to be realized due to the tapestry of discriminatory policies and actions upon which this reform is introduced. Just a

month before the law took effect, the Saudi Press Agency reported the arrest of seven campaigners, five women and two men, working to create a non-government organization called “Amina” that would offer support and shelter victims of domestic abuse.<sup>14</sup> Accused of “collusion with foreign entities to undermine the security of the state,” these individuals will be persecuted for their criticism of the government’s feigned commitment to recent social openings being pushed by the Crown Prince. Furthermore, the Saudi government’s tokening of this singular reform—in an effort to appear “centrist,” thereby attracting additional foreign investment and international support—could distract from the substantial and persistent gender inequality.

## CONCLUSION

Economic opportunity fueled the motivation behind this reform. However, constructing an insincere façade of gender equality without acknowledging a multitude of other discriminatory policies cannot hide the sweeping inequalities that remain throughout the country. While this decree represents a triumph for activists in Saudi Arabia, numerous roadblocks to attaining complete gender equality persist, with the largest being the mandatory guardianship of women.<sup>15</sup> The residual impact of traditional gender roles may limit the willingness of women to embrace their new right. Institutionalized sexism will continue to limit Saudi women as they pursue equal treatment under the law and throughout society.

However, the economic benefit of this single reform will have ubiquitously positive impact on Saudi Arabia. Therefore, the manner in which Saudi leaders adapt other social policies to complement this drastic new shift will demonstrate their true commitment to advancing gender equality.

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## ENDNOTES

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